THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
Restored

John M. Buchanan
March 19, 2000

"The church exists so that God has a community in which to save people from meaninglessness, by reminding them who they are and what they are for. The church exists so that God has a place to point people toward a purpose as big as their capabilities, and to help them identify all the ways they flee from that high call. The church exists so that people have a community in which they may confess their sin—their turning away from life, whatever form that destructiveness may take for them—as well as a community that will support them to turn back again. The church exists so that people have a place where they may repent of their fear, their hardness of heart, their isolation and loss of vision, and where—having repented—they may be restored to fullness of life."

Barbara Brown Taylor

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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RESTORED
JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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Mark 5: 21-43
". . .your faith has made you well; go in peace. . ."
(Mark 5:34)

Startle us with your truth, O God. We are so busy and preoccupied, and worried about this and that, that we miss the miracles—of love and life and beauty. So startle us and open our hearts and minds to your word, your presence, your love—in Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

It is a harrowing moment when a child is desperately ill and no one can seem to do anything about it. I will never forget my mother's life-long grief for two red-headed sisters she lost in the great influenza epidemic in her childhood in the early part of the century; Mary—a teenager, and the baby—Betty—both gone for decades, but she never forgot them or family's feeling of desperate helplessness.

When his daughter became critically ill, Frederick Buechner learned about the limits of his parental power and authority.

"What happened was that (she) stopped eating. There was nothing scary about it at first . . just the sort of thing any girl who thought she'd be prettier if she lost a few pounds might do . . . But then as months went by it did become scary. Anorexia nervosa is the name of the sickness she was suffering from." There was nothing he could do—no argument, no warning or pleading, no cajolery or bribing would make her start eating."

Psychiatrists told him he could not cure her—that the best thing he could do for her was to stop trying to do anything. It was very difficult. "The only way I knew to be a father was to take care of her—to move heaven and earth to make her well, and of course, I couldn't do that. I didn't have either the wisdom or the power to make her well." (*Telling Secrets*, A Memoir, p. 23-26)

When a child is gravely ill and no one can seem to do anything, it is a defining moment. And so who can't understand the father who runs to Jesus because his 12-year-old daughter is dying? His name is Jairus. He is an important man, a leader in the synagogue. He has access to the best medical resources available. He has no doubt tried them all and his daughter is dying. So it is a desperate man who runs to this healer from Capernaum whose reputation is spreading far and wide throughout Galilee, runs and throws himself at Jesus' feet—which itself must have been quite an event, this dignified, respected community leader, groveling at the feet of a carpenter's son from Nazareth, of all places—"begging repeatedly—My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live."

Without a word, Jesus went with him—the large crowd of the curious who had witnessed this dramatic encounter, following along to see what would happen next.

What happens next is an interruption—an unwelcome interruption almost from anybody's point of view. You want to say to this woman, "Can't you see he's busy, in a hurry? A little girl is dying and he has to get to her quickly. Surely you understand. Surely you can wait."

The late Henri Nouwen told a wonderful story of a distinguished Notre Dame Professor with whom Nouwen was residing. The older teacher said to Nouwen, "You know, my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work." (*Reaching Out,* p. 36)

It's not only an inopportune, untimely interruption, it is terribly inappropriate, offensive even. A woman who had suffered from hemorrhages—bleeding—for twelve years, sneaked up behind him and touched his cloak. Modern physicians flinch at the way she is described, although their patients sometimes love it. "She had endured much under many physicians and had spent all that she had, and she was no better, but rather grew worse."

Now there's a big problem brewing here that we miss sometimes. That woman's physical condition had earned her the religious designation "unclean." She was believed to be impure, because of her bleeding. Because it never stopped, she could not engage in the monthly purification rites required by all Jewish women. So she was permanently "unclean," not allowed to be in the synagogue, to participate in any religious rituals; she was not married, lived alone—was looked down on, ostracized, marginalized, isolated, alienated—a kind of ultimate outsider.

Listen to how feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Reuther describes her: "Jewish law regarded a woman with a flow of blood as unclean and polluting anyone else she touched. Jesus' reaction to the woman shows his deliberate discarding of the taboo, while the woman's own terror at being discovered in touching his garment reveals her awareness at violating the taboo." (*New Woman, New Earth,* p. 64)

That's why she is so surreptitious—sneaking up out of the crowd from behind, reaching out to touch his robe. And it worked. The bleeding stopped—but somehow Jesus knew something had happened and asked, "Who touched me?"

We've almost forgotten that there is an important mission underway. He was hurrying to the bedside of a dying 12-year-old. Her father is frantic—even the disciples are impatient as he takes his time, talks to the woman who by now, having been discovered, is cowering at his feet. "Daughter," he says—my guess is no one has called her that or any term of endearment for at least twelve years—"Daughter," he says, "your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

The emerging problem is that he is not only late—in fact too late—he's also now unclean. He has been touched by this unclean woman. The law is clear. He must stop what he is doing, take all his clothes off, bathe, wash his clothes and withdraw from all human contact until sundown. He is officially unclean—contagious—he is not supposed to touch anyone.

And instead of complying with his religion's rules and regulations, he sets out once again for Jairus's house—an unclean healer—a wounded healer, to use Henri Nouwen's lovely phrase—to the most ritually fastidious, religiously correct household of the leader of the local synagogue. Messengers have come with the worst possible news. He's too late. The little girl is dead. Maybe spending time unnecessarily with the woman back there has made him too late.

Friends, family, neighbors have already begun the ritualized mourning practices, keening, weeping, wailing—like newspaper pictures of the mothers of dead Palestinian or Israeli soldiers.

What happens next will not submit to the intellectual analysis that is our western way of thinking. We have to ask, "Did it really happen? Did that dead little girl get up? Was she really dead? How did it happen?" And we could simply stop right here and spend the rest of this sermon on that.

There are many who attribute to the Bible historical, factual accuracy. If it says it, it happened. There are those who say it didn't happen because things like that can't happen. And there are many of us who are willing to say we don't know what happened—that dead girls don't ordinarily get up and walk, although modern medicine is causing us to be a lot less sure of ourselves: that to believe in God is to believe in the possibility of the unusual, the extraordinary, the miraculous, if you will, but that all of that quite misses the point. Something stunning happened that day, and we believe that the account of what happened contains a word from the Lord to us. So the real question is not did it happen just like that, but what is God saying to us, to me, in this story?

They laughed at him. He took the child's parents, mother and father, into that room. He took her by the hand. That, too, by the way, is against the law. If she's dead, she's as unclean as the bleeding woman back there, but Jesus has already polluted himself. So he lifts up her lifeless body and says something affectionate—intimate. Curiously, Mark gives it to us not in the Greek with which he's writing this story, but the Aramaic Jesus spoke. *Talitha, cum.* "Little girl—little lamb," actually, "get up!" And she got up. And Jesus said, "give her something to eat."

Jesus continues to disregard and intentionally disobey those religious rules and regulations that divide the human race into insiders and outsiders. Jesus continues to disregard and deliberately disobey the strict religious orthodoxy that excludes men and women from the community because of their uncleanness, their physical condition, their moral rectitude even. This is nothing less than a revolutionary, alternate social vision. And we cannot miss the irony. Those who are most threatened by it and therefore who oppose it—and will kill him rather than compromise—are those who are most devout, most passionate about their own moral and theological and liturgical purity. It is clearly the point he is making day in and day out—with people who have leprosy, paralysis, sinners, hemorrhaging women, dead little girls. There is no human condition so bad—so marginal that hope is absent. There is no human condition, even death, that is outside the reach of God's love. It is a vision of human wholeness, unity, harmony, community and peace. It is a compelling vision to which he is inviting his followers. It is called the Kingdom of God.

It is difficult to preach this sermon and not ask whether His followers, His church today, hears Him and understands the radical inclusivity of the Kingdom of God as He described it and lived it. It is difficult not to want the whole enterprise to apologize—as Pope Paul II did last week—get down on its knees and apologize for so grossly missing the point. It is difficult not to say again that the mission of His church is not to preserve its purity but to risk its purity and theological orthodoxy and doctrinal correctness by reaching out to welcome all and to show the world a picture of God's kingdom where there are no outsiders, unclean, marginalized.

Obviously that is where I want to go. But I need to go another direction, and that is to dig just a bit deeper and ask about the miracle. After all, her physician would today prescribe medication that would cure that woman almost immediately—and to her it would have been astonishing. And in some Chicago hospital today a patient's heart will stop and breathing cease and there will be a code blue and emergency drugs will be injected, perhaps directly into the heart, and perhaps electric shock, and the heart will resume beating and lungs will fill with air and eyes flutter open and a woman or man or child will be alive again and no doubt, eat a little food. So part of what a miracle is depends on when you are living and where. But maybe there is something deeper and more important here than physical healing even.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in what I think is a particularly eloquent description, says that every miracle is "like a hole poked in the opaque fabric of time and space. The kingdom breaks through and for a moment in time we see how things will be or how they are in the mind of God and then it is over . . .The problem with miracles," Taylor says, is that "it's hard to witness them without wanting one of your own." (*Bread of Angels,* p. 136-137)

The problem with miracles is that people who need them and pray for them don't always get them. The *Tribune* last week carried an article "Teen's Illness Tests Faith on her Campus," about 18 year old Kaia Jergensen, a student and athlete at an evangelical Christian college who contracted a particularly severe form of meningitis. Her family asked her fellow students to pray for her and they did, fervently. Students organized an around the clock prayer vigil—so that at least one person was praying for Kaia at all times. The students, "mindful of biblical references to the power of prayer, expected results. I wanted to see Kaia wake up, be healed and walk out of the hospital," said Chris Helms, 20, who had the 4:40 a.m. shift. "I prayed that I'd one day see her running on the basketball court again."

A week after the vigil, surgeons amputated both of Kaia's legs—her situation remained critical. Her fellow students' faith was shaken. The organizer of the prayer vigil was crushed. "It shook our faith," he said. A professor said, "now they have to reconsider. They used to think they were in control of their life. They have had to come to terms with the fact that they aren't." (*Chicago Tribune, 3/10/00)*

The prayer vigil is on, but the petitions are different now. The students are learning about faith. Faith is believing when there are no miracles. Faith is trusting God when our fervent requests are not met. Faith is bold asking and then trusting when we do not get what we asked for. Faith is trusting God with our lives regardless of what happens.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote: "Did Jairus have faith? Mark never said so. He just followed Jesus home and watched that unclean holy man do his work. Either way, the high point was not then but earlier, when Jesus told him, 'Do not fear, only believe.' If Jairus was able to do that, then he would have survived whatever happened next, even if Jesus had walked into his daughter's room, closed her eyes with his fingertips and pulled the sheet over her head. Her father's belief would have been the miracle at that point, his willingness to trust that she was still in God's good hands, even though she had slipped out of his." (p. 139, op.cit.)

The miracle is that God has come to us in this one, this wounded healer, who reaches across all the barriers to touch and love and include those who are lost and isolated and sick—even those who are dying. The miracle, which Lent quietly observes, is the miracle of God's love. The invitation is to participate in that miracle, to trust that love which will never let us go.

The words are almost a thousand years old.

"Jesus, the very thought of Thee
With sweetness fills my breast;
But sweeter far Thy face to see,
And in Thy presence rest.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

The following prayer was offered by John H. Boyle, Parish Associate of The Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago at the morning worship service on Sunday, March 19, 2000.

Eternal God, giver of life when life is endangered, and provider of hope when the future seems most foreboding, you breathe into the dust of earth the breath of life, you turn the ashes of sorrow and regret into the joy of forgiveness, you take the brokenness of our lives and restore us to the wholeness of a new being.

O Hope of every contrite heart, we are grateful that your business with the world is not to condemn it, but to save it, and that your keen desire is to say to each of us, "Go in peace and be healed."

In your mercy let your healing grace now touch all whose need of it is urgent and whose desire for it may be desperate. Grant us the gift of tears, that our eyes may be cleansed of the grit of self preoccupation, and our dried hearts watered with compassion for those whose needs and sufferings now become clear to us. And then, O God, guard us against the astigmatism of our own eagerness, lest our need to help become more important than what may be most needed by others.

In such a spirit we pray for all throughout the world who are in dire need of food, shelter, freedom, medicine, healing, and hope. Bless the efforts of all who seek to provide aid and comfort to the people of Africa, especially those in flood-covered Mozambique, those in war-torn Eritrea and Ethiopia, those suffering from civil strife in Zimbabwe and South Africa, those ravaged by AIDS in Zambia, and those racked by pangs of hunger in the Sudan.

Keep alive, we pray, the peace process in Ireland, in Israel and the Near East, and wherever such efforts to heal nations are being made. And grant that instances of real or perceived injustice not spawn violence among the outraged whether elsewhere or in our own country.

We pray for the life and work of the Church here and around the world. May neither disillusionment nor despair dull our love for the Church which at her best gathers round those who are falling and props them up on every leaning side. Help us through your Church to cause needed change, to celebrate edifying change, and to cope creatively with unexpected change.

Bless, we pray, the ministry of our brother in Christ, Pope John Paul II, as he makes his pilgrimage this week to the Holy Land. Grant that in both symbol and substance his journey may be edifying to him, and point us all more clearly in the direction of peace, reconciliation, healing, and the restoration of all who have been excluded to their rightful place in the community.

Gracious God, you who know us intimately and love us endlessly, help us not to confuse the burdens of life that circumstances compel us to bear with the cross that we are called to and choose to bear for the sake of the welfare of others. And when it comes time for us to do just that, O God, help us not to falter but, trusting in your truth and grace, to do the faithful thing in answering that call and in making that choice.

We pray in the name of him who says yet again, "Go in peace and be healed," as we pray the prayer he taught his disciples - (The Lord's Prayer). Amen.